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# GUIDE TO RESEARCHING BOSTON BUILDINGS

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## INTRODUCTION

The following guide has been prepared to assist those wishing to research the history of buildings and districts within the City of Boston. It is intended for students and non-professionals who seek to document buildings that are probably not well-known enough to have been extensively documented in standard sources. The guide therefore focuses on the use of primary sources such as public records, atlases, and photographs which, if properly used, will yield information on almost any building.

The attached bibliography is likewise not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to list the most valuable and accessible sources of information on Boston buildings. (More detailed bibliographies on specific topics and areas are available from the Boston Landmarks Commission.) Finally, a list of institutions where records are located, as well as a summary of research procedures, are included for those not already familiar with them.

It should be noted that in doing research on buildings, two distinct types of information are being sought: physical data on topography, plot subdivision, building dimensions, type of construction and materials, and physical changes; and historical data on architects, builders, owners, dates, and events associated with the building or area. Some sources contain either one or the other of these two categories of information, but more often they are combined in one source. The exact order in which sources are consulted therefore varies, but it is best to get basic information on dates, architects, and topography first, and then to consult published sources such as contemporary guidebooks, histories, and periodicals. If these bibliographical sources do not turn up enough information, a search of primary sources such as Deed and Probate Records, City Directories, and contemporary newspapers, although time-consuming, may be necessary. This is particularly so in the case of buildings built before about 1850, on which little information generally exists in standard sources.



## PUBLIC RECORDS AND OTHER PRIMARY SOURCES

1. Building Department Document Jackets - Located at the Boston Building Department Documents Examination Room, these envelopes contain records of most building and alteration permits after about 1890, according to street address. The most useful document in the envelope is the building permit itself, which lists the building's original owner, architect, builder, cost, dimensions, type of construction, and of course date. In the absence of this, permits for major alterations often contain some useful information as well. Note: There are permits on file for some pre-1890 buildings, while some built after 1890 do not have them--hence the presence or absence of a permit is not a reliable dating factor.
2. BPL Card File - The Fine Arts Department of the Boston Public Library has compiled an extensive card file of information on specific Boston buildings and architects, including references to locally available books, articles, obituaries, prints, photos, and plans. Indexed alphabetically by street address and by building name, as well as by architect, this file can save much time in consulting pertinent sources.
3. National Register Index - This index, published annually by the U.S. Department of the Interior, lists all sites, structures, and districts on the National Register of Historic Places, alphabetically by State, County, and City, and is available at the Government Documents Department of the BPL. Any building or district which is listed here will have a nomination form which contains basic historical information and a bibliography. Copies of these forms are on file at the Boston Landmarks Commission and the Massachusetts Historical Commission.
4. Real Estate Atlases - These atlases were compiled by private surveyors (such as Bromley, Hopkins, and Sanborn) in about 5 year intervals beginning in 1874. They show lot lines and building outlines and list property owners on all parcels within the City of Boston with great accuracy. They are thus valuable sources for dating individual buildings and particularly for tracing the topographical development of whole areas. Incomplete sets exist at the Suffolk County Registry, the Building Department, the Bostonian Society, the Boston Athenaeum, and the Boston Public Library. (A complete inventory of atlases and their locations is available from the Landmarks Commission.)
5. 1910 Street Laying-Out Guide (See Bibliography) - This listing of all streets, alleys, and public ways within the City of Boston gives their date of origin as well as subsequent changes in name, widenings, extensions, etc. It is therefore useful in tracing street pattern development, which in turn gives many clues to building activity, and can be located at the Government Documents Department of the Boston Public Library. Because it lists all streets alphabetically by their names in 1910, some present-day streets may appear under earlier names. These can be determined by consulting the most recent edition (1976) of the Street Guide.

6. Assessor's Records - The present ownership of a building or parcel (which serves as the starting point for a title search or a request for access to examine the building) can be determined through Tax Assessor's records in Boston City Hall. Parcels are listed alphabetically by street address for each ward, which yields a parcel and bill number. Owners names and addresses are then listed in separate volumes indexed by bill numbers.
7. Deed Records - Though often a tedious process, a title search to establish a chain of ownership for a piece of property can turn up valuable information such as construction date, original owner, and changes in use and value, where other sources fail. Deed records for the City of Boston are located at the Suffolk County Courthouse; records for Dorchester before 1872 (when it was annexed to Boston) are located in the Norfolk County Registry in Dedham.

The procedure for tracing a title is as follows:

Beginning with the present owner's name, and the building address, consult the most recent Grantee Index which lists purchasers of property alphabetically. Proceed backwards in time until a transaction involving the present owner and subject property is located; this will yield a reference to the Volume and Page where the deed to the present owner is recorded. This deed will then lead to the previous owner, who can then be looked up in the Grantee Index to determine the owner previous to him, and so on. Often a deed will itself refer to the previous transaction, which saves the trouble of consulting the Grantee Index. This process is repeated until the original owner is found, with careful attention given to the description of the property being conveyed and changes in boundary or price, which often give clues to building activity or other topographic changes. For instance, if a Greek Revival Style house is located on a parcel which deed records show to have been first subdivided from a farm lot in 1838, it is safe to assume that the house was built shortly thereafter. Dramatic fluctuations in price can also indicate that a building has recently been erected or demolished.

A record should be kept of each deed reference in the chain, by volume and page number, and including Grantor (Seller) and Grantee's (Owner's) names and residences, date, price, and physical and boundary description. Breaks in the chain of title occasionally occur, due to such things as an unrecorded or missing deed, or inheritance by an heir with a different surname. The former is most often unresolvable, while the latter can usually be surmounted through Probate Records (see below).

A few additional suggestions:

- In order to save time in tracing a particularly long title, owner's names which appear on real estate atlases can be used as starting points, rather than present owners.



- Mortgages have opening language almost identical to deeds, and are recorded in the same books, so it is advisable to take careful note of whether the reference given in the index is for a deed or mortgage. The type of document is also frequently identified in the margin of the page itself. The existence of two instruments with the same date conveying the same piece of property back and forth between two people is almost invariably indication that the Grantor has given a mortgage to the Grantee.
- Note references to property plans, which were often recorded with the deed. If a volume and page number are given, the plan is located in the bound volumes; a plan number indicates that it is on file at the Plan and Map Department of the Registry.
- The Registry clerks are almost invariably available to give advice should problems arise.

8. Probate Records - Records relating to the inheritance of property are often necessary to complete the chain of ownership. These are located in Probate Court in the Suffolk County Courthouse, and are used as follows:

The name of the deceased person is listed alphabetically within chronological volumes of an index, yielding a case number. The numerically indexed volumes listing these case numbers in turn provide volume and page references for each instrument related to the probating of the deceased estate--will, inventory, division of estate, etc. The volumes are then consulted for copies of the instruments.

9. City Directories - Published sporadically between 1789 and 1800, and almost every year after then, the City Directories list all city residents alphabetically and by street address, along with their occupations, and are thus valuable source of information about building occupancy and use. Complete sets of directories are available at the Bostonian Society and on microfilm at the Boston Public Library.
10. Photographs and Prints - Early photos and prints are often useful in documenting the historic appearance of and subsequent changes to buildings and areas. Large and well-indexed collections of architectural photographs can be found at SPNEA and the Bostonian Society; smaller but still useful collections exist at the Athanaeum and the Print Department of the BPL. Photos are generally indexed by street and/or by building name.
11. Newspapers - contemporary newspaper articles and obituaries can provide descriptions and other detailed information on buildings and biographical data on architects. Complete copies of virtually all Boston newspapers of any note are on microfilm at the BPL. However, only obituaries are indexed; hence references to buildings can only be found when a construction date is known.

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### II. Topographical Histories

Boston Street Commissioners. Record of Streets, Alleys, Places, etc., in the City of Boston. 2nd ed. Boston, 1910.

Shurtleff, Nathaniel B., A Topographical and Historical Description of Boston, Boston 1870, 1871, 1891.

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Hitchcock, Henry-Russell. Boston Architecture 1637-1954. New York, 1954.

Kilham, Walter H. Boston After Bulfinch. Cambridge, 1946.

Kirker, Harold, Bulfinch's Boston, Oxford, 1964.

Whiffen, Marcus American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to the Styles, Cambridge, 1969.

Withey, Henry F. and Elsie Rathburn Withey Biographical Dictionary of American Architects, Deceased. Los Angeles, 1956.

### IV Contemporary Guidebooks and Accounts

Bacon, Edwin M. Bacon's Dictionary of Boston, 1886.

An alphabetically organized compendium of information on Boston topics--institutions, buildings, professions, etc. The entry on "Architecture and Architects" is a useful introduction to Boston buildings in this period.

Damrell, Charles S. A Half Century of Boston's Buildings. Boston, 1895.

A detailed account of major construction after 1845, with attention to building statistics, the enactment of building laws and ordinances, prominent architects, and technical developments. Its usefulness is impaired by its lack of an index.

Engelhardt, George W. Boston, Massachusetts. Boston, 1897.

A publication of the Chamber of Commerce, presenting Boston as a center of trade and industry. Illustrated with photographs and drawings of many manufacturing and commercial buildings. Interiors as well as exteriors are often shown.

Herndon, Richard. Boston of To-Day. Boston, 1892.

Although most this weighty volume is taken up with biographical sketches of leading citizens, the generously illustrated preceding sections on the city's physical character and institutional and commercial life present a useful picture of Boston at the time of publication.

King, Moses. King's Handbook of Boston. Boston, 1878.

A profusely illustrated and exhaustive guide to the city's landmarks and institutions.

Perry, Edgar, Solid Men of Boston, Boston 1891

Biographical sketches of prominent figures in business, politics, medicine, etc. in late 19th century Boston.

Stanwood, Edward Boston Illustrated, 1872, 1875, 1878.

An illustrated guide book to the city containing numerous prints of pre- and post-fire downtown commercial buildings.

#### V. Bibliographical Sources

Boston Engineering Department. List of Maps of Boston Published between 1600 and 1903, Copies of which are to be found in the Possession of the City of Boston and other Collectors of the Same. Annual Report of the City Engineer. Appendix I. Boston, 1903.

An invaluable listing, arranged by date, and giving for each map its cartographer, its published reproductions, size, and scale, and the location of originals.

Boston Landmarks Commission Bibliography of Sources on Dorchester History. Typescript, Boston 1977.

This bibliography of locally available sources includes maps, atlases, directories, articles, pamphlets, as well as a complete listing of photographs in the S.P.N.E.A. library.

Boston Public Library Boston Views: An Index Recording Views of the Boston Scene in the Library's Collections, in Book Illustrations, Prints and Photographs. Typescript. Boston, 1963.

An extensive listing, limited by its use of Boston Public Library call numbers as references to published material.

Columbia University Library Avery Index of Architectural Periodicals. New York, 1965

An alphabetical index by subject of articles, plates, and references in major American Architectural Journals.

Columbia University Library. Avery Architectural Library. Avery Obituary Index of Architects and Artists. New York, 1963.

An index covering newspapers and major architectural periodicals since 1934. The major American journals have all been back-indexed to their first issues.

Hunnewell, James. Bibliography of Charlestown, Massachusetts, and Bunker Hill, Boston. Boston, 1880.

A chronological listing of materials on Charlestown and published there, including legislation, histories, institutional catalogues and publications, material on notable citizens, directories, and serial publications, the last under its date of first publication. There is an index to personal names and a subject index. Supplemented by the bibliography in Hunnewell's A Century of Town Life (see above) pp. 261-300.

## INSTITUTIONS

- \* Boston Athenaeum: 10½ Beacon Street, Boston  
Boston Landmarks Commission: Room 944, Boston City Hall  
Boston Public Library: 1154 Boylston Street, Copley Square, Boston
- \* Bostonian Society Library: Old State House, 206 Washington Street, Boston  
City of Boston Building Department: 8th Floor, Boston City Hall  
City of Boston Assessing Department: 3rd Floor, Boston City Hall
- \* New England Historical and Geneological Society: 101 Newbury Street, Boston
- \* Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) Library: Harrison Gray Otis House, 141 Cambridge Street, Boston  
Suffolk Registry of Deeds: 4th and 5th Floors, Suffolk County Courthouse, Pemberton Square, Boston

\*These are private libraries; arrangements for using them should be made in advance with each.

## ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THE USE OF SOURCES

- 1) Preliminary information on building, architect, builder, alterations, and owners can be found in Documents from Building Department.
- 2) General historical data and descriptions can be found through early histories, guide books and newspapers.
- 3) Information on architects can be found through Withey, newspaper obituaries and the BPL Fine Arts Department Card File.
- 4) Original appearance can be determined from old photos.
- 5) Information on use and occupancy can be found in City Directories.
- 6) An ownership history, and other clues pertaining to changes in structure or use, historical associations, etc. can be found through a title search at the Registry.
- 7) Geneological information can be found at the New England Historical and Geneological Society, and through wills and inventories at Probate Court.
- 8) Additional information on buildings associated with a religious group society, business or trade, club, institute, etc. can often be found in records from that groups' papers or documents.

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